

The First Social Worker

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In 1977, a young instructor of social work was quietly working in his office, when a full professor of history popped his head in and asked, "Did you know that the first social worker bore your name?" The quick and intelligent reply was, "Huh?!" However, the curiosity had been wetted and the professor was asked to stop and explain. He said, "I don't have much information, but I do know that the first deacons of the church functioned as social workers. You really should read *The Acts Apostles* and look into it." In fact, diving into it led to a full weekend at the Library of Congress, and an interest that has lasted for years. The following is an effort to draw a picture of the person known as the first social worker, and the environment surrounding him.

The Mid-East remained in turmoil after the death of Jesus circa 33 A.D. The Roman Empire continued to forcefully occupy this geographic region. As is often the case in such situations, sporadic guerrilla warfare broke out. However, the inhabitants were not an effective fighting force against the supreme army of the western world. In the wake of their failure was a large number of orphans, widows and disabled men, all requiring spiritual and economic comfort

The followers of Jesus were making an earnest effort to keep the major tenets articulated by their leader. They initially remained within their Jewish synagogues, but with growing tensions. Central to understanding this environment is appreciating the difference between two groups within the Christian community in Jerusalem: the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews. The Hebraic Jews represented the statistical majority, spoke Aramaic and/or Hebrew, and had generational roots in this geographic area. The Hellenistic Jews were Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora. Following military conquest, these people had been carried off as slaves to countries throughout the known world. Now, generations later, they had returned to Jerusalem. They were, however, usually in a position of social and economic inferiority.

The Hellenistic Jews' orphans, disabled men, and particularly widows were not getting their fair share of food and other help as compared to the Hebraic Jews. This was naturally causing suffering--and complaints. The leaders of the Christian community were made aware of this inequity in the distribution of the community's resources to those in need. They acknowledged that discrimination was not consistent with the teachings of Jesus, and realized that they could not micro-manage it all themselves. The task of managing and caring for the destitute merited the creation of a new position, with seven openings.

The community's leaders looked within the Hellenistic community itself for people to be selected to undertake this social service. Seven men were selected, based on "honest report, full of the holy spirit and wisdom"(Acts 6:3). They were Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. It is important to note that these were all Greek names and were, therefore, probably all Hellenistic Jews. People from within the section of the community which

had the problem were chosen to deal with those problems; the solutions were not imposed from outside. Today we would call this "empowering people." Hellenistic Jews were given power and authority to assure fairness within their own community.

Such was the environment leading to the establishment of the first "diakonate" or social ministry. Some theologians who specialize in church history actually use the words "social workers" to describe the first deacons. Others suggest that the first deacons did the job of social work. Yet, the custom of collecting money and food to be distributed to those in need was not new within the Jewish tradition. They had a weekly distribution called Kuppah (literally, "Basket"). For immediate pressing needs there was the daily collection called Tamhui ("Tray"). These customs were adopted by the early Christians. The circumstance in this situation was unusual, however. This was the first time specific persons were selected by the community and given permanent positions with the authority to carry out this work for the mutual good of society.

Stephen and Philip are the only deacons of which we know anything further. In fact, we read that Stephen did great work among the people. He seems to have been unusually effective and infuriated a number of both Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews. The result was that the first social worker was brought before the Sanhedrin, the High Court of the Great Temple in Jerusalem, on trumped-up charges. Because Stephen was effective in his work among the people, he was put in the arena of public scrutiny, and as an unintended consequence received undesirable attention. Stephen also advocated that God was everywhere and could therefore be worshipped anywhere, at any time--not just in the Temple. Such talk was considered blasphemous by the Jewish leaders. A hidden agenda should be noted here. If people were allowed to routinely worship outside of the Temple, these religious leaders would lose both social status and income.

A religious trial resulted from the bogus accusations, and the end result was that Stephen, the first social worker, was found guilty-and paid with his life. He was executed by stoning. Stephen sacrificed his life for his values and beliefs. His work as a deacon/social worker was so that all people might be treated with respect and fairness, regardless of their socio-economic standing or ethnic background. As the missionary teacher Florence Alshorn said, "An ideal is not yours until it comes out of your finger-tips." It is easy to proclaim social work values and ethics, but it is a different story to live by them. Stephen wanted to do the right thing. He made the choice to be true to his beliefs and therefore his ethics. He strove to make his ideals real through his work, and he chose to suffer any consequences, no matter how severe. Stephen, the first social worker and the first Christian martyr, is a good role model for us. He consciously understood that certain human values must be prominent in his life, even though many did not share those values with him. He believed he was chosen for service. Without regard to the popularity of his position, he clung to his beliefs.